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Grant's Final Campaign:  
A Study of Operational Art

A Monograph  
by  
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Infantry



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## ABSTRACT

The attached monograph, "Grant's Final Campaign: A Study in Operational Art," examines General Grant's 1864-65 campaign as an example of combat at the operational level. The monograph begins by presenting the strategic setting--international and domestic--within which Grant conducted his campaign. The author analyzes Grant's campaign from four perspectives: the General's plan and how that plan was executed, the means with which he had to carry out his campaign plan, the system that he used to command and control his subordinate armies, and how each of these fit together into a synchronized whole. In the conduct of this analysis, the author argues that the two traditional understandings of this campaign are both lacking. Neither those who claim Grant's campaign was one designed to exhaust the South thus bringing them to terms, nor those who claim Grant tried to annihilate the South by destroying Lee's army in a "gigantic concentration" of all armies at one decisive point are correct. In developing this argument, the author identifies two important points where General Grant's campaign departs from classical military theory. First, from the classic understanding of "annihilation" solely as destruction of the enemy armed forces to destruction of armed forces and resources--i.e. destruction of an enemy's war-making capability. Second, from the classic concentration of forces at a single point for a decisive battle to a concentration of effects distributed over time and space for a decisive campaign. Thus the author concludes that Grant's campaign of 1864-65 exemplifies a form of warfare at the operational level different from that governed by classic military theory. This is, to study Grant's final campaign is to study modern operational art.

**SCHOOL OF ADVANCED MILITARY STUDIES**

**MONOGRAPH APPROVAL**

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On the second of March, 1864, the United States Senate confirmed the nomination of Ulysses S. Grant as lieutenant general. With this act, President Lincoln returned decision to the war.<sup>1</sup>

From the previous July when Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg and Lee began his withdrawal from Gettysburg, the war began to look better from the Union's perspective. Clearly, Vicksburg and Gettysburg were turning points in the war.<sup>2</sup> However, in general the war had not gone as well as President Lincoln had hoped. Even after the twin victories of July 1863, final victory was not certain. In the west, the Union retained the initiative it had seized at Vicksburg. Chattanooga fell in September; Chickamauga, in November. However, events in the east--the theater almost everyone considered the most important--took an opposite turn. The Army of the Potomac lost the momentum it had gained with its victory at Gettysburg. Far from beaten, Lee successfully disengaged and returned to Virginia. By October, Lee's army was again moving northward in an attempt to turn Meade's right flank and head toward Washington.<sup>3</sup> Militarily, Lee's attack produced little; psychologically, it yielded significant results. His move demonstrated to the Union that the South was still strong. For even after Lee's threat to Washington ended and he returned to Virginia, his army blocked all Union attempts to move south. General Grant sums up the situation in the east as accurately as anyone, "the opposing forces stood in substantially the same relations toward each other as three years before."<sup>4</sup> After three years of war, the North had not achieved military victory, and President Lincoln still faced significant political difficulties at home and abroad. In fact, politically, the President was in dire straits.

In *How the North Won*, Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones ascribe to the most widely held view of General Grant's 1864-65 campaign. "Explaining his strategy of exhaustion," these

authors claim, "Grant gave a very full account of the logistical objective of the campaign and of the advantages of...raiding but not occupying enemy territory."<sup>5</sup> Edward Hagerman in *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare* also believes that the General's campaign was designed to wear Lee down by attrition and logistic exhaustion.<sup>6</sup> To the contrary, J.F.C Fuller expresses a second, minority, view. In Fuller's opinion, General Grant's campaign was a grand design whose purpose was "either to annihilate [Lee] or hold through hitting, whilst Sherman was to advance" against Lee's rear.<sup>7</sup> Fuller thought that the General ultimately intended to concentrate all his armies against one decisive point--Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia--unless Lee could be destroyed prior to falling back upon Richmond's entrenchments.

Hence the student of General Grant's campaign confronts two opposite views. On one hand, Hattaway, Jones, and Hagerman argue that it was a strategy of exhaustion--i.e. a strategy that uses attrition to wear out an enemy in the attempt to "convince" the enemy to accept the conditions one offers. On the other hand, Fuller claims it was a strategy of annihilation--i.e. a strategy that uses attrition to directly attack the enemy army in the attempt to completely defeat then impose one's will upon the enemy. This monograph argues for a third alternative. That is, the General's campaign was a campaign of annihilation, but one finds little evidence that corroborates Fuller's claim that General Grant intended a "gigantic concentration" of all armies at one decisive point--i.e. a classic battle of annihilation.<sup>8</sup>

In developing this argument, the monograph will identify two important points where General Grant's campaign departs from classic military theory. First, from the classic understanding of "annihilation" solely as destruction of the enemy armed forces to a conjunction of armed forces and resources--i.e. destruction of the enemy's army and its war making capability. Second, from the classic concentration of forces at a single point or the conduct of a

decisive battle of annihilation to a concentration of effects distributed over time and space for the conduct of a decisive campaign.

### THE STRATEGIC SITUATION.

As General Grant became commander of all the Northern Armies, domestic support to continue the war was not at all assured. Within the week following Vicksburg and Gettysburg draft riots broke out in New York City, Boston, Portsmouth, N.H., Rutland, Vt., and Troy, N.Y. as well as other cities. Varying to degree by city, residences and businesses were looted, draft headquarters were stormed, arson was widespread, and attacks were perpetrated against black citizens and their churches. "Only the return of troops from Gettysburg...brought [the New York City riot] to an end."<sup>9</sup> Just below the surface of domestic unrest seethed a strong anti-war movement fed by three years of inconclusive war and an anti-war faction of the Democratic party. Vicksburg and Gettysburg had taken some of the teeth out of the charge that the war was a failure, but the powerful members of the anti-war faction were not to be allayed.<sup>10</sup>

One of the leaders of this movement, and running for governor of Ohio, was Clement L. Vallandigham. In a speech delivered in early 1863, he claimed that the south could not be defeated and the the main results of the war so far were "defeat, debt, taxation, sepulchres...the suspension of *habeas corpus*, [and] the violation...of freedom of the press and of speech." He wanted to "stop fighting....make an armistice....[and] withdraw [the] army from the seceded states."<sup>11</sup> Another well-known anti-war Democrat, Pennsylvania state supreme court judge George W. Woodward, wrote an opinion that the national conscription act was unconstitutional and inoperative in Pennsylvania.<sup>12</sup> Even more alarming was the rumor that the gubernatorial candidates in Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio (representing nearly half of the North's population) would, if elected, recall thier state's soldiers and search for a peaceful resolution to



the war via a "convention of states."<sup>13</sup>

In addition to believing that the war should end, the anti-war Democrats were not happy with the abolitionist turn the war had taken as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation. They played on racist themes and tried to couch the war in terms of an "irrepressible conflict between white and black laborers."<sup>14</sup> They went so far as to say,

Let every vote count in favor of the white man and against the Abolition hordes who would place negro children in your schools, negro jurors in your jury boxes, and negro votes in your ballot boxes!"<sup>15</sup>

Democratic newspapers, ever circulating among Union soldiers, supported much of the anti-war rhetoric. At one point "so many members of two southern Illinois regiments deserted 'rather than help free the slave' that General Grant had to disband the regiments."<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, the anti-war Democrats represented a minority. In fact both Woodward and Vallandigham lost their bids for governorships. The Vicksburg and Gettysburg victories, followed by the seizing of and ultimate breakout from Chattanooga, wet the movement's "we can't win" blanket. The valor of the 54th Infantry during the battle of Charleston precluded racism from becoming a national policy.<sup>17</sup> Emancipation became a galvanizing and motivating force in the North, and opposition to emancipation became opposition to northern victory.

However, while the rise of anti-war sentiment was checked, anti-war Democrats remained a viable political force. Theirs was not an insignificant minority. Thus, the President had to take them into account in both political and military affairs. Equally viable was President Lincoln's re-election opposition. Just as military victory was not certain, neither were "Lincoln's renomination and re-election."<sup>18</sup> Salmon P. Chase, the Secretary of the Treasury, was a strong contender. Generals Fremont and McClellan also had movements pushing their nomination. In fact, many saw General McClellan as one of the most popular Democrats and most powerful of the President's opponents. Reportedly, McClellan said that if elected, he

would "recommend an immediate armistice and call for a convention of all the states and insist upon exhausting all and every means to secure peace without further bloodshed."<sup>19</sup> President Lincoln prevailed, albeit not with as strong a mandate as he would have liked. Cracks in his party's--as well as the nation's--support resulted from his reconstruction plans. But the biggest crack of all concerned "whether [the] war could be won....A Confederacy that had seemed on the ropes at the end of 1863 had come back fighting and appeared likely to survive."<sup>20</sup> The cost of the war in human, political, social, and economic terms was ever-present.

Present also were concerns of foreign intervention which "was a standing menace until the spring of 1865."<sup>21</sup>

The British press...voicing the opinions of the governing classes of Great Britain, was unanimously against the North, and Mr. Gladstone went so far as to congratulate Jefferson Davis on having 'made a nation.' Napoleon III was antagonistic to the United States as a whole....His object apparently was to create a buffer state between Mexico and...both parties in the Civil War. No sooner had the War begun, than he began to interfere in Mexico. On June 10, 1863, Marshal Bazaine entered [Mexico City], and on April 10 the following year, Maximilian, Napoleon's protege, was crowned Emperor.<sup>22</sup>

As was the case in the domestic sphere, the victories at Vicksburg and Gettysburg went a long way toward killing British and French support of the Confederacy. However in the winter of 1863 and spring of 1864, the possibility of foreign intervention on behalf of the South remained alive; the North could not be assured that European nations would recognize and assist the Confederacy. Even as late as July, 1864, the "first topic of conversation" at a meeting between Secretary of State Seward and General Grant was "the unfriendliness of our relations with England" from the first year of the war "and especially now."<sup>23</sup> Upon the mind of every prominent citizen, political leader, and general officer loomed these concerns--domestic and international.

This was the strategic setting when, on the 9th of March 1864, Major General Ulysses S

Grant received his commission as a Lieutenant General from President Lincoln with the words, "The nation's appreciation of what you have done, and it's [sic] reliance upon you for what remains to do [sic], in the existing struggle, are now presented with this commission....With this high honor devolves upon you also, a corresponding responsibility."<sup>24</sup> Two days later, the War Department placed General Grant in command of all the Northern Armies. What the General was to do, the responsibility of which the President spoke, was clear to all: bring the Civil War to a close, thus re-establishing the United States of America as one union. Just 53 days after his being placed in command, on the 3rd of May 1864, "wagons began to move...toward the lower crossings of the Rapidan, heading for the haunted clearings of Chancellorsville, where unburied skeletons lay among dead leaves."<sup>25</sup>

In 1988 James M. McPherson wrote, "The South was scraping the bottom of the manpower barrel....With the Union's three best generals--Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan--in top commands, the days of the Confederacy appeared numbered....in the spring of 1864 the progress of the Union arms seemed assured."<sup>26</sup> Such assurance may be clear to historians writing with 124 years of hindsight. Doubtful, however, that as General Grant rode toward the Wilderness in 1864, he felt the assurance of which McPherson spoke.

No doubt General Grant was confident. He had a good plan, what seemed to be sufficient means in terms of numbers of armies, amount of materiel, and quality of subordinate leaders. Furthermore, he was confident in his own abilities to "put it all together." But the path between him and ultimate victory was not obstacle-free. Students of General Grant's campaign would do well to remember these words of Clausewitz:

Everything looks simple [in war]; the knowledge required does not look remarkable, the strategic options are so obvious that by comparison the simplest problem of higher mathematics has an impressive scientific dignity. Once war has actually been seen the difficulties become clear.... Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult...The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction....that

[distinguishes] real war from war on paper....This tremendous friction, which cannot...be reduced to a few points, is everywhere...and brings about effects that cannot be measured, just because they are largely due to chance.<sup>27</sup>

Though the General may have been confident, he was all too familiar with friction to be assured of anything. He knew that his was going to be a tough job, and this knowledge is reflected in his *Personal Memoirs*: "[Victory]," he wrote, "was not to be accomplished...without as desperate fighting as the world has ever witnessed; not to be consummated in a day, a week, a month, or a single season."<sup>28</sup> His responsibility was to plan and execute a campaign that would win--and nothing less important than the fate of the nation rested on victory.

Success. That is why General Grant was given overall command and that is what he aimed to produce. In analyzing the General's campaign, four factors seem vital to its success: his plan, his armies, the command system he used to coordinate his armies and, the way in which these three elements fit together.

### CAMPAIGN ANALYSIS

The centerpiece of General Grant's plan was the realization of his strategic aim: bring the Civil War to a close on President Lincoln's terms--union. However, the General was not a completely free agent. Whatever plan he ultimately developed was constrained in four ways. The General's campaign would have to support the President's reelection, maintain popular support for the war, preclude foreign intervention on behalf of the South, and achieve timely action.

The plan had to ensure that President Lincoln remained in the White House. Like many a politician, the President wanted to remain in power in order to complete his political agenda. He had a plan for reconstruction, and he wanted to carry it out himself. Second, it had to help maintain popular support of the war in the North. Only with popular support came the two vital "commodities" of money and conscripts. Moreover, popular support would help keep the

President in the White House. Conversely, sentiment against the war would most likely translate into votes against President Lincoln. Third, whatever plan was adopted had to show the international community--Great Britain and France especially--that the North would prevail. These three concerns explain why, in a letter to General Grant written just three days before the campaign began, President Lincoln stated that he was "anxious that any great disaster, or the capture of our men in great numbers, shall be avoided."<sup>29</sup> Fourth, General Grant knew of the President's need for timely action and relayed this urgency to his staff when he returned from his first interview with the President in Washington. The General explained,

that [the President] did not pretend to know anything about the handling of troops, and it was with the greatest reluctance that he ever interfered with the movements of army commanders; but he had common sense enough to know that celerity was absolutely necessary; that while armies were sitting down waiting for opportunities to turn up which might, perhaps, be more favorable from the strictly military point of view, the government was spending millions of dollars every day; that there was a limit to the sinews of war, and a time might be reached when the spirits and resources of the people would become exhausted.<sup>30</sup>

These four considerations, as well as "purely military ones," factored into General Grant's analysis of the situation.

When this process actually began, one cannot tell. For sure, the General had begun thinking about how the Union armies could coordinate their actions as early as January, 1864. In response to a letter in which General Halleck asked for "an interchange of views," General Grant sketched out one possibility.<sup>31</sup> In a March 15th letter to Banks however, General Grant stated that he had "not...fully determined...a plan of campaign for this Spring."<sup>32</sup> Yet, the General did have a rough idea of what he wanted to do, for in the same letter he stated that it was his "desire to have all parts of the Army, or rather Armies, act as much in concert as possible."<sup>33</sup> General Sherman also reports that after General Grant turned over the command of the Western armies (March 18, 1864), the two generals were able "to discuss privately many little details incident to the contemplated changes, and of preparation for the great events then

impending."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, they "reached the satisfactory conclusion that, as soon as the season would permit, all the armies of the Union would assume the 'bold offensive' by 'concentric lines' on the common enemy, and would finish up the job in a single campaign if possible. The main 'objectives' were Lee's army behind the Rapidan...and Joseph E. Johnston's army at Dalton, Georgia."<sup>35</sup> In a letter to General Sherman, General Grant confirmed their discussion and revealed the overall structure of his plan. "It is my design," wrote General Grant on April 4, "if the enemy keep quiet and allow me to take the initiative in the spring campaign, to work all parts of the army together, and somewhat towards a common center."<sup>36</sup>

Two features of the plan are important. First, that General Grant identifies two of the enemy's armies as the main objective points of his campaign. Second, that General Grant envisions a campaign--not a battle--as that which will result in victory. The first feature is important because General Grant's actions throughout the campaign can only be understood properly relative to these two objective points: Lee's army because it personified the rebellion and protected Richmond; Johnston's because it protected one of the major transportation hubs in the south--Atlanta. Furthermore, one must also measure Johnston's importance relative to Lee. If the two armies merge, the war could go on beyond what Lincoln would consider politically and economically acceptable. Throughout the subsequent campaign, General Grant kept the focus on these two main objective points.

The second important feature is General Grant's vision of a unified campaign throughout the theater of war. The scope of this vision was unprecedented. "Before this time," General Grant wrote, "these various armies had acted separately and independently of each other, giving the enemy an opportunity often of depleting one command, not pressed, to reinforce another....I determined to stop this."<sup>37</sup> Everyone would contribute to one end; in the words of President Lincoln, "Those not skinning can hold a leg."<sup>38</sup> General Grant realized that "it will not be

possible to unite [his subordinate] Armies into two or three large ones....But, generally speaking, concentration can be practically effected by Armies moving to the interior of the enemy's country."<sup>39</sup> This realization is vital because it demonstrates that the General's vision was not one of a classic decisive battle in which all the opposing armies concentrated on one battlefield. Such actual concentration was impossible. However, "practical" concentration-- i.e. the concentration of effects--was possible, and this type of concentration is what General Grant sought to create via his campaign.

Thus, the kind of campaign that General Grant had in mind was one that would be characterized by a series of battles--some fought sequentially, others simultaneously--that would be distributed across the entire theater of war. No one battle would likely be decisive, but the cumulation of the effects of all would be. These characteristics are those now associated with operational art. Furthermore, the General's campaign would be aimed, to use his words, at using "the greatest number of troops practicable against the armed force of the enemy."<sup>40</sup> General Grant realized that "no peace could be had that would be stable and conducive to the happiness of the people...until the military power of the rebellion was entirely broken."<sup>41</sup> General Grant sought not to exhaust the South's will to fight thus bringing the Confederates to the negotiating table; rather, his goal was annihilation-- i.e. breaking the military power of the rebellion.

To break the South's military power, the North was to destroy their ability to conduct combat operations by coordinated attack of those combat forces, logistics, and infrastructure that the South needed to fight--this was the military end-state (to use contemporary military parlance) that would realize President Lincoln's strategic aim. Again, General Grant's words are telling:

I...determined...to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources until, by mere attrition, if in no other way, there should be nothing left to him but an equal submission with the loyal section of our common country to the constitution and laws of the land.<sup>42</sup>

"To do this," General Grant writes to Rosencrans on March 26th, "the garrisons for holding territory acquired and where there are no organized bodies of the enemy threatening, must be reduced to the smallest number possible necessary for the end to be accomplished."<sup>43</sup> In a telegram to Sherman, the General explained his plan to use economy of force in non-vital and non-threatened areas so that he could concentrate his forces.<sup>44</sup> General Grant had no intention of wasting his forces or his time on peripheral enemy forces or resources. His campaign would focus; he sought a campaign that would attack all, but only, those forces and resources the South needed to wage war. Thus, his was a campaign of annihilation, not exhaustion.

This all-encompassing vision of a campaign of annihilation, in addition to the strategic considerations--domestic and international--discussed earlier, provides the background against which General Grant identifies the decisive points of campaign and assigns his theater army commanders their missions. Annihilation required that the North "hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resource" and destroy the "military power of the rebellion." Therefore, the following become important: (See map at appendix 1.) Lee's army in Virginia; Johnston's army in Georgia; the rail centers at Atlanta, Augusta, Savannah, Charleston, Petersburg, Harpers Ferry, Strasburg, Staunton, and Charlottesville (the last four in the Shenandoah Valley, map A at appendix 2); the ports of Norfolk, Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, and New Orleans; Richmond, as the capital of the Confederacy; the Shenandoah Valley, not only because of the rail centers, but also because of the valley's use as a Confederate food source and as an avenue into Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Washington, and the Southern cavalry force under Forrest. Finally, for reasons of political importance, Washington, D.C. was also a decisive point.



The relationship of these decisive points to the missions General Grant assigned to his subordinate theater commanders is readily apparent in this summary.

The main blow would be struck by the Army of the Potomac (commanded by General Meade) against the Army of the Northern Virginia (commanded by General R.E. Lee), while simultaneous subsidiary offensives would be launched in the other theaters: by Sherman in Georgia; by Sigel in the Shenandoah Valley...; by Butler from the mouth of the James River; and by Banks from New Orleans against Mobile.<sup>45</sup> (See maps at appendix 1.)

In this one unitary vision are combined General Grant's strategic aim, the political constraints under which he had to conduct the campaign, his military end-state and operational objective points, the campaign's main effort, and the missions of each of his subordinate theater armies. Throughout the campaign, General Grant would maneuver his armies so that the effects of the battles each fought would combine to achieve his military end-state: the destruction of the South's armed forces and resources.

While General Grant's end-state and operational objectives remained constant from start to finish, the means varied as the situation directed. In his initial letters of instructions to his subordinate theater army commanders, General Grant was very clear about what he wanted each to do in the first stages of the campaign. He was also clear about how each subordinate's operations fit into the overall campaign plan.<sup>46</sup> However, General Grant does not discuss details of what he expected his subordinates to do in subsequent stages, except in two cases.<sup>47</sup> On April 19th, the General wrote to Butler to discuss what would happen if Lee disengaged from Meade and fell back to the entrenchments of Richmond.<sup>48</sup> On the same day, the General sent a second letter to Sherman outlining what to do if Johnston attempted to break contact and move to join Lee.<sup>49</sup> Thus, General Grant's campaign was both thorough and flexible, one able to take advantages of opportunities as they presented themselves during the campaign. Additionally, the coordinated maneuvers and battles distributed throughout the theater of war would reap for General Grant important advantages: first operational freedom of action for his forces while

denying such freedom to the enemy; second, a cumulative effect on the enemy's ability to wage war.

General Grant's search for operational freedom of action is often overlooked. Most students of the campaign focus on the General's term "by mere attrition" in describing his overall plan; they miss his important qualifier, "if in no other way." This qualifier reveals an important element of the General's campaign plan--the use of operational maneuver. The initial plan used all armies acting in concert. The battles that would be fought in each theater of operations were intended to preclude, in General Grant's words, "giving the enemy an opportunity of depleting one command, not pressed, to reinforce another."<sup>50</sup> That is, the initial phases of the campaign were to deny the South the operational freedom of action they had enjoyed previously. The General would seize operational freedom of action from the South by engaging the main Confederate armies simultaneously. In General Sherman's words, the initial plan was to have Butler "move against Richmond...Meade straight against Lee, and I [Sherman] to attack Joe Johnston and push him to and beyond Atlanta."<sup>51</sup> Then, General Grant planned to retain freedom of action for himself by capitalizing on the flexibility inherent in his campaign plan. "This," as Sherman said, "was as far as human foresight could penetrate."<sup>52</sup> But this was as far as General Grant needed to go with the initial plan. Keeping his end-state and operational objectives, as well as his overall vision constant, General Grant could direct his subordinate theater armies as the situation developed. The details of the vision unfolded as the situation developed. In the words of the General's secretary, "[Grant] was always ready to conform to the changing actualities as they occurred."<sup>53</sup> Thus, the initial plan was as far as General Grant needed to go, as long as he maintained the freedom of action which allowed him to take advantage of opportunities as they arose.

General Grant's campaign design also produced a cumulative effect on the enemy. His

vision included an unrelenting pressure on the enemy's main armies and the constant destruction of his materiel and infrastructure--thereby annihilating the South's war making capacity. For example, on March 29th the General wrote to Ord, one of Sigel's subordinates in the Shenandoah Valley, "[your] main object will be to destroy the East Ten. & Va. rail-road so that it can be of no further use to the enemy during the rebellion....[and anything else that] may be made useful by the enemy."<sup>54</sup> Thus, the General seemed to realize that freedom of action was itself a means and that maneuver alone would not win the war. He knew that "it will always be found in the end that the only way to whip an army is to go out and fight it."<sup>55</sup> General Grant sought operational freedom of action so that he could fight, kill, and destroy on his terms-- "until the military power of the rebellion was entirely broken."<sup>56</sup> The General understood that he could not have destroyed the South's capacity to wage war in one battle of annihilation. Nowhere in his correspondence does General Grant envision his major armies concentrating at one point in the theater of war. His vision was clear: he sought to break the military power of the rebellion by a well coordinated series of maneuvers and battles throughout the depth and breadth of the theater of war, "co-operative action of all the Armies in the field" to "hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources."<sup>57</sup> That is, he would conduct a campaign to annihilate not just the South's armed forces, but also the Confederate capacity to wage war.

The end that General Grant wanted to attain seems to have been clear before the campaign began. His plan was a good one, but did he have the means execute it?

The soldiers of each of General Grant's five theater armies--Meade's in Virginia, Sherman's in Georgia, Banks' in New Orleans, Sigel's in the Shenandoah Valley, and Butler's at the mouth of the James River--were sufficiently physically fit and technically proficient to do what was required of them. Their training and tactical ability, although varying in degree by

unit and by time of year, was also satisfactory enough to execute the maneuvers ordered. In addition, each of the armies had enough room, roads, and rail with which to operate. Each had separate lines of operations, bases, and lines of communication. Finally, the overall organization and command structure of the Union army supported General Grant's overall campaign plan. Therefore, the difficulties that the General would have in executing his plan would not stem primarily from any of the foregoing--soldier, training, unit cohesion, geography, infrastructure, organization, or command structure. Rather, General Grant's main obstacle, as far as his own forces were concerned, was the lack of competency and aggressiveness in some of his subordinate army commanders.

General Grant's main effort was General Meade's Army of the Potomac. (See maps at appendix 2.) Therefore, acting as a "quasi" army group commander, the General would travel with this army. On one hand, this arrangement was quite natural, for the commander should accompany the main effort. On the other hand, General Grant's presence was often awkward and contributed to the sometimes well-founded rumor that he was the *de facto* commander of the Army of the Potomac with General Meade the nominal commander. The discomfort caused by this relationship was to come and go throughout the campaign. Sometimes the Grant-Meade relationship was all that anyone could expect. Bruce Catton endorses this position when he writes: "[General Grant] and Meade hit it off on sight....The two men sensed that they could work together....There was warmth and mutual respect....[and] Meade himself felt a few weeks after Grant's appointment that he could be a more effective commander."<sup>58</sup> Other times, particularly when General Grant seemed to take command, the relationship was testy. Most revealing of this side of the relationship is Meade's remark as General Grant left for Sherman's headquarters after having taken Lee's surrender at Appomatox, "I am curious to see whether Grant, when he joins him [Sherman], will smother him as he did me."<sup>59</sup>

One might wonder why General Grant did not replace Meade right at the outset. The President and the Secretary of War would have supported a request by General Grant to replace Meade, but neither they nor the General wanted to do so.<sup>60</sup> General Grant was new to the Army of the Potomac and was to start a major campaign within two months of his becoming General-in-Chief of the Union Armies. The General knew that his subordinates would need time to get used to him as their new commander. However, he also knew of the President's desire to get on with the war and of the McClellan-esque impression he would create if he "reorganized" the Army of the Potomac or took time for everyone "to get to know one another." If the General were to start his campaign as quickly as he wanted, the best decision seemed to be: work through Meade. The Army of the Potomac trusted Meade as did his subordinate commanders. The less General Grant did to interfere with this established trust, the better. The General probably thought that his personal presence would offset whatever shortcomings the Army of the Potomac had--given that the in-place chain of command remained. Changing senior commanders within 60 days of the start of the campaign would inhibit success, not enhance it.

Tactically, Lee "out-maneuvered" the Army of the Potomac in each of the battles from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor. Part of Lee's success in tactical maneuver lie with the fact that he had the advantage of interior lines, the terrain favored the defense, and his lines of communication were much shorter and more protected than were General Grant's. An equally important part of Lee's success lay with the slowness with which the Army of the Potomac reacted to orders, a lethargy caused by an army "directed by Grant, commanded by Meade and led by Hancock, Sedgwick and Warren."<sup>61</sup> In this sense, then, the awkward Grant-Meade relationship contributed to the slow tempo of operations endemic to the Army of the Potomac. However, a second and perhaps more important reason for the lethargy concerned the army's generals themselves. Their "reflexes," observes Catton, "were sluggish. Between the will and

the act there was always a gap. Orders received were executed late, sometimes at half-stroke....[the army had a] fatal, ineradicable tendency to let details look after themselves...[this was] the way things went wrong in the Army of the Potomac."<sup>62</sup> From the Wilderness to Petersburg, many of General Grant's plans had been ruined by subordinates.<sup>63</sup>

The Army of the Potomac's slow reaction to orders and lack of attention to detail resulted in a number of missed opportunities. Meade was unable to get between Lee and Richmond, thus could not get the Army of Northern Virginia to do open battle outside entrenchments. Nevertheless, one of the main elements of General Grant's campaign plan was accomplished. The General may not have retained tactical initiative, but he held on to operational initiative. Lee blocked the Union armies in almost every tactical move. But in doing so, he danced to the North's tune and to General Grant's lead. In being locked into the series of battles from the Wilderness to Petersburg, Lee lost operational freedom of action. He could shift but few of his forces to meet the attack of Sherman, Banks, Sigel, or Butler.<sup>64</sup> Nor could Johnston send Lee much help. As dull as the Army of the Potomac was as a military instrument, it was sharp enough to do what General Grant needed it to do: seize and maintain operational freedom of action and initiative.

Sherman's Western Army, however, was far from dull. It was the sharpest of General Grant's military instruments. Not only was Sherman's army sharp, so was he. Sherman was the most trusted and able of General Grant's subordinates. The two generals had fought together down the Mississippi, seized Vicksburg, and continued the attack to Chattanooga. Generals Grant and Sherman were more than senior and subordinate. They became confidants and comrades-in-arms. Through the years of fighting together, they developed a common outlook toward war. So close was their relationship that when General Grant became commander-in-chief, Sherman was his sounding board.

Sherman knew what was expected of him and his army, and he did it. He fought from Chattanooga south, and by early July threatened Atlanta. By September, Atlanta was in Union hands--physically, a key rail center was taken from the South; psychologically, and perhaps more importantly politically, an enormous boost was given to the North. Throughout, Sherman had kept Johnston occupied. (See maps at appendix 3.) While some may say that *en route* to Savannah, Sherman lost sight of his main objective--Hood's army (Hood replaced Johnston at Atlanta), such a claim comes to naught. First, Hood was not moving to link-up with Lee; second, General Thomas at Nashville was available to handle Hood. For psychological, political, economic, as well as military reasons, Sherman marched through Georgia to Savannah. He did this after extensive consultation with and approval of General Grant.<sup>65</sup> This maneuver had not been pre-planned, but fit into General Grant's overall vision "to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources....until the military power of the rebellion is broken."<sup>66</sup> In fact just days after the evacuation of Atlanta was ordered, General Grant wrote to Sherman and said, "As soon as your men are properly rested and preparations can be made it is desirable that another campaign should be commenced. We want to keep the enemy continually pressed to the end of the war."<sup>67</sup>

The General sent one of his staff officers to Sherman with a letter summarizing the situation in Petersburg-Richmond. In the letter, General Grant admitted that he did not know "what [Sherman was] to do with the forces at [his] command," but made several suggestions and awaited Sherman's reply.<sup>68</sup> While the generals pondered what they should be do, Sherman rested, resupplied, and paid his soldiers in Atlanta. September and October saw a series of letters and telegrams exchanged between General Grant and Sherman. Early in the exchange, Sherman stated his preference to "move through Georgia smashing things to the sea," but not until November did he present General Grant with the three options under consideration and his

recommendation.<sup>69</sup> The one which, in Sherman's view "would have a material effect upon [Grant's] campaign in Virginia," and interestingly enough the one executed, included a "break up [of] the road between Columbus and Macon...then [a]...feint on Columbus...[and a move] via Macon and Millen, to Savannah." <sup>70</sup> This move Sherman says in his memoirs, "was a direct attack upon the rebel army and the rebel capital at Richmond, though a full thousand miles of hostile country intervened."<sup>71</sup> The march from Atlanta to Savannah did keep the pressure on the South. The march destroyed the rail and crops between the two cities and created the psychological feeling of impotency among the people and the government of the South. In terms of war resources, Sherman's capture of Savannah netted "12,000 bales of cotton, 190 cars and 13 locomotives, 3 steamboats,...an immense supply of shells,...all kinds of ammunition....a complete arsenal...valuable machinery....[and] 150 fine guns with plenty of ammunition."<sup>72</sup> In General Grant's words, "[Sherman's] march through Georgia had thoroughly destroyed all lines of transportation in that State, and had completely cut the enemy off from all sources of supply to the west of it."<sup>73</sup>

As Sherman marched toward Savannah, General Grant had thought about bringing Sherman's army to Virginia by sea, and he sent a letter to that effect on 6 December 1864.<sup>74</sup> However, Sherman was very uneasy about this plan, for it was "so complete a change from what [he] had supposed would be the course of events."<sup>75</sup> On the 18th of December, Sherman expressed his initial reactions to General Grant: first, that he had coordinated with General Easton for the necessary transport for the move north in compliance with the General's orders; but, second, that he does "sincerely believe that the whole United States...would rejoice to have [his] Army turned loose on South Carolina, to devastate that State in the manner we have done in Georgia: and it would have a direct and immediate bearing on your campaign in Virginia."<sup>76</sup> In a subsequent letter dated December 22nd, Sherman presented a detailed counter-proposal.



Rather than board vessels, Sherman suggested that his army "go on...via Columbia and Raleigh."<sup>77</sup> General Grant approved by saying, "your confidence in being able to march up...pleases me....Disorganize the South and prevent the organization of new Armies....Break up the rail-roads in South and North Carolina and join the Armies operating against Richmond as soon as you can."<sup>78</sup> So not only did Sherman continue the destruction of Southern war resources, but also he prevented the joining of Johnston's army (who replaced Hood) with Lee's by keeping the former engaged. As far north as Raleigh, Sherman remained in contact with Johnston. His words to General Grant reveal how tightly he held to his opponent: "I will go straight at him."<sup>79</sup>

Sherman's freedom to maneuver against Savannah, and then north through the Carolinas, resulted from the structure of General Grant's campaign plan. Few Confederate forces were available to oppose Sherman because they were otherwise occupied. Furthermore, in moving north from Savannah, Sherman realized General Grant's original campaign vision. All armies worked in coordination with one another, the main enemy armed forces remained engaged, and the north continued its destruction of the Confederate war resources. Unfortunately, while Sherman and his army cut their way through the south, Banks, Sigel, and Butler carved little with their armies.

Through a private messenger, General Grant told Banks to "commence operations against Mobile as soon as [he could]."<sup>80</sup> (See map at appendix 1.) "It would be impossible," General Grant continues in his *Personal Memoirs*, "for him [Banks] to commence too early."<sup>81</sup> But because Banks was involved in another expedition up the Red River in Louisiana and into Texas--linked in part to the French involvement in Mexico--he was not able to move against Mobile when the campaign started in May, 1864. Banks, whose "department continued to absorb troops to no purpose to the end of the war," was ultimately relieved and replaced by General Canby.<sup>82</sup>

But even Canby did not begin his attack toward Mobile until March 20, 1865--well after Atlanta fell and Savannah was occupied. Further, Canby did not force the surrender of Mobile until the 12th of April, two days after Lee surrendered to General Grant and "much too late to have any effect upon the war."<sup>83</sup> To a large degree, Sherman's successes made Bank's failure and Canby's effort irrelevant. Such was not the case, however, with Sigel in the Shenandoah Valley.

Sigel had a vital part in the campaign. He "was to advance up the valley, covering the North from invasion....Every mile he advanced also gave [the North] possession of stores on which Lee relied."<sup>84</sup> (See maps 2A and 2C at appendix 2.) But Sigel failed, miserably. He had been "ignominiously beaten....routed."<sup>85</sup> The result: the South retained the valley as a food source and had use of its rail centers. Worse, Breckinridge was able to dispatch two brigades east to reinforce Lee.<sup>86</sup> Everything General Grant wanted not to happen in the valley had occurred. General Sigel was replaced by General Hunter.<sup>87</sup> Hunter's instructions were similar to Sigel's. He was "to move up the Valley...cross over the Blue Ridge to Charlottesville and go as far as Lynchburg if possible, living upon the country and cutting the railroads and canal as he went."<sup>88</sup> While Sheridan's cavalry was with him, initially Hunter was successful. However, "on his own, Hunter did not do well."<sup>89</sup> He advanced too slowly, giving Lee a chance to reinforce. "The chance to seize Lynchburg was gone, lost somewhere between choosing the wrong road, stopping to burn houses, and the belief that it was time to be cautious, and there was only one thing Hunter could do--retreat."<sup>90</sup> Hunter went north toward Winchester, pushed hard by the Confederate General Early. On August 6th, Sheridan replaced Hunter and in him General Grant finally had a winner.

Sheridan began his initial attack up the Valley on the 10th of August, but Early was too strong to push far. By the 15th of September, however, the correlation of forces changed, and

Sheridan attacked in earnest. Ten days later, "one of the main objectives of the [overall campaign] began to be accomplished."<sup>91</sup> Following this victory, General Grant instructed Sheridan to

threaten the Va. Central rail-road & Canal in the manner your judgement tells you is best....If you make the enemy hold a force equal to your own for the protection of those thoroughfares it will accomplish nearly as much as their destruction. If you can not do this then the next best thing to do is to send here all the force you can....You need not...send here more than one Division of Cavalry.<sup>92</sup>

One sees from this letter that General Grant remained focused on his original vision. Sheridan's operations were important for several reasons. First, his success in the Valley precluded its use by the Confederates as an avenue north, as a source of supply, and as a rail line providing logistical support to Lee. Additionally, in this letter and several others the General reiterated the importance of destroying the railroads and canal to "cut off [Lee] from Southwest Va."<sup>93</sup> The South made one more attempt to control the valley, but failed. By mid-October, the Valley was Union property. The rail centers, food source, and avenue north were, once and for all, taken from Lee.

Subsequent instructions on 20 February, demonstrated that General Grant had not intended for Sheridan to shift a large force from the Valley to join that of Meade and Butler around Petersburg-Richmond, but "from Lynchburg...strike south...and push on and join Sherman."<sup>94</sup> Sheridan, unfortunately, had different plans for himself. Unlike Sherman who understood the value in not concentrating, Sheridan "wanted to go east and join Grant in front of Richmond....he wanted to go where the action was."<sup>95</sup> In the words of his *Memoirs*, Sheridan says, "Feeling that the war was nearing its end, I desired my cavalry to be in at the death."<sup>96</sup> Events occurred that delay Sheridan joining Sherman. Sheridan explains, in a 10 March letter to General Grant, "I had to remain at Charlottesville two days--this time was consumed in

bringing over from Waynesboro our ammunition & pontoon trains. The mud was horrible beyond description."<sup>97</sup> No doubt all that Sheridan reported was true; no doubt also that delay suited his purposes. For on 14 March General Grant writes, "I am disposed now to bring your Cavalry over here, and to unite it with what we have and see if the Danville and South Side road cannot be cut."<sup>98</sup> Sheridan was in his saddle en route to Richmond the next day.<sup>99</sup> Less than a week later Sheridan arrived and began refitting his horses. General Grant worried that "there is now such a possibility, if not probability of Lee and Johnston attempting to unite, that I feel extremely desirous not only of cutting the lines of communication between them but of having a large and properly commanded cavalry force ready to act with in case such an attempt is made."<sup>100</sup> Sheridan was to be that force.

Ultimately such a link-up did not occur, and Sheridan was used in the final pursuit and encirclement of Lee. Sheridan's use demonstrated four important aspects of General Grant's campaign: first, the General's constant focus on the two main objective points--the armies of Johnston and Lee; second, the continued emphasis on destruction of both enemy armed forces and resources; third, the General's flexibility in adjusting to changing situations; and fourth, his reluctance to physically concentrate all his armies in one geographic location. The bulk of Sheridan's force remained in the Shenandoah Valley. Sheridan's cavalry moved east, initially not to join the armies of the Potomac and James, but to move between Johnston and Lee. Last, Sheridan's actions in the valley and General Grant's subsequent desire to interpose Sheridan between Lee and Johnston demonstrate again how much the General sought to retain operational freedom of action while denying it to his opponent.

Like the Army of the Shenandoah under Sigel and Hunter, the Army of the James under Butler proved to be a blunt instrument. "Before the advance commenced," wrote General Grant in his *Personal Memoirs*, "I visited Butler at Fort Monroe....Before giving him any order as to

the part he was to play in the approaching campaign, I invited his views. They were very much as I intended to direct....to move...as far up the James River as possible...and push on from there....having Richmond and Petersburg as his objective."<sup>101</sup> As with Meade, Sherman, Banks, and Sigel, Butler's attack was to commence on May 4th, 1864. Butler's role was important. General Grant hoped that the Army of the James could seize Petersburg, an important rail center connecting Richmond with the deep south, and entrench itself between Petersburg and Richmond while Meade fought Lee.<sup>102</sup> If Lee's army escaped destruction at Meade's hands and fell back to Richmond, General Grant hoped "to make a junction of the armies of the Potomac and the James on the James River."<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, Butler "made no great effort to establish himself on [the road between Petersburg and Richmond] and neglected to attack Petersburg, which was almost defenceless....In the meantime Beauregard had been gathering reinforcements [then counterattacked] with such success as to limit very materially the further usefulness of the Army of the James as a distinct factor in the campaign."<sup>104</sup>

Though General Grant may have wanted to relieve Butler as a result of this ineptitude, he could not. Butler was a war Democrat that the President needed. He was even mentioned as a presidential candidate. Catton writes of Butler's position: "Politically, Butler was up where he could be reached by nobody but the President, and if the President did not choose to reach him Grant certainly could not....and in the spring of 1864, with a presidential election coming up, no Northern politician could forget that Butler was an all-out war man with a strong Democratic following."<sup>105</sup> In the end, Butler was relieved over his absolute ineptitude in the attack of Fort Fisher and Wilmington, and after the presidential election. However, this relief came after the Army of the James bungled a number of opportunities. Not until General Grant arrived with Meade's Army of the Potomac did the attack on Petersburg take on life. By then, however, it was too late. Lee had been given the chance to reinforce and get behind the formidable defense works

at Petersburg and Richmond. The attack turned into a seige, a stalemate of the worst kind.

The stalemate was broken only by the cumulative effects of General Grant's overall campaign was having on Lee. In a letter to President Davis, Lee expressed his fear "about our ability to procure supplies for the army."<sup>106</sup> With Sherman in Atlanta and moving toward Savannah, Sheridan taking the Shenandoah from Early, and the junction of the Armies of the Potomac and James at Petersburg, that fear became a reality. During the fall of 1864 and the winter of 1864-65 each of the decisive points General Grant identified fell into Union hands. "Strategic advantages," writes Catton, "gained far apart in time and space...had a cumulative effect, and the weight of them now was irresistible....In spring the Southern nation had still been a unit...now it was mere fragments."<sup>107</sup> Spring 1865 saw fighting in and around Petersburg and Richmond, but Lee came to realize that he had only one move "left to him...if he hoped to go on with the war."<sup>108</sup> That is, withdraw from his entrenchments, break contact with the Northern armies, move west, pick up supplies from Lynchburg or Danville, and link-up with Joe Johnston somewhere.<sup>109</sup> Lee tried, but Sheridan beat him to Appomattox Station. His army surrounded and cut off, Lee surrendered. Shortly thereafter, the war was over.

In total, the field armies subordinate to General Grant were adequate to the task, but not much more than that. The General trusted Sherman and left him alone. All of the other major subordinate commanders who started the campaign in 1864, less Meade with whom General Grant travelled, were relieved at one point or another. Over the period of about a year, through a series of battles, General Grant accomplished what he set out to do. That is, he broke the military power, armed force and resources, of the rebellion. His campaign of annihilation worked, whereas a battle of annihilation would have failed--if it were possible at all. Throughout, the General's focus remained on the armed force and the resources that the South needed to wage war. While some could say he lost tactical freedom of action at several points,

none could deny that General Grant retained operational freedom of action during the entire campaign; and this freedom, a product of the structure of the General's overall campaign plan, proved decisive.

Further, none deny that General Grant ever lost sight of the logistics necessary to carry out his campaign. Logistics played an important role in deciding the line of operations that Meade followed. The logistics bases of the Army of the Potomac moved from river port to river port as the army moved south. Thus, Generals Meade and Grant were assured of the shortest lines of communication between their base and zones of operation. General Grant also ensured that Sherman attended to logistics preparations for his operations--first by stocking up in Atlanta before moving east, then by replenishing in Savannah. For his move north, Sherman relied upon river lines of communications from coastal bases. Butler's operations drew their support from a main base at Fort Monroe and a forward base at City Point, both along the James River. Thus, as with the other theater armies, Butler's logistics was well established. So too were those of Sigel, Hunter, and Sheridan in the Shenandoah and Banks and Canby in the deep south. Logistics did not "drive" operations, but General Grant did pay close attention to both the details of logistics planning and the synchronization of that planning with operations.

Where the existing infrastructure required to move, support, and command his armies was insufficient or nonexistent, General Grant built what he needed. In fact, the kind of campaign General Grant conceived and executed could not have been possible without the road network, railroad, rivers, ports, and telegraph lines that either existed or were constructed. The General would have had to devise a much different campaign if he would have been unable to shift supply bases from one river port to another or been unable to use rail, road, or telegraph to reach his subordinates.

While infrastructure was important to General Grant's method of command, so was his style. This style had four main characteristics: building consensus, written communications

with subordinates by letter and telegraph, use of his staff, and personal visits.

General Grant began building consensus among his subordinated soon after receiving his commission as a lieutenant general. "Grant faced the task," Catton tells the reader, "of planning, organizing and directing things in such a way that the maximum number of...soldiers could be put simultaneously into action. By the time schedule he set for himself he had just six weeks to do it."<sup>110</sup> March and April 1864 saw General Grant furiously at work. The day after receiving his commission as General-in-Chief, he visited Meade's headquarters in Virginia to discuss "the position, condition, and future of the army."<sup>111</sup> In Nashville several days later, the General met with Sherman and his senior subordinate commander in what could only be called a "commander's conference". The purpose, in Sherman's words, was "to discuss...many little details incident to the contemplated changes, and of preparation for the great events then impending."<sup>112</sup> General Grant also met with Butler, visited Washington about once a week, and wrote to Sigel and Banks. When the campaign began, every one of General Grant's major subordinate commanders knew the overall plan and their part in it.

During the execution of the campaign, the General was no less busy keeping his commanders informed, providing either direction or guidance, or maintaining his presence in their headquarters. General Grant wrote or telegraphed his subordinates, and seniors, often. In fact, "Meade's chief of staff once remarked that 'there is one striking feature of Grant's orders; no matter how hurriedly he may write them on the field, no one ever has the slightest doubt as to their meaning.'<sup>113</sup> The use of his staff as a "directed telescope" as well as conduit for orders is well-known.<sup>114</sup> Finally, the General personally visited commanders--whether on horseback, boat, or rail--when he thought doing so was needed to get the job done. During these visits, he asked for and received the opinions of his subordinates--sometimes complementary, sometimes critical. He thought nothing of his subordinates making suggestions to improve the



conduct of his campaign. Unlike previous commanders-in-chief, General Grant did not exercise command from Washington. He did it in the field, and he did it directly. He was personally involved, at the decisive point--if not in person then in writing or in the person of a member of his staff. Whatever cost this system may have had in terms of friction among his subordinates, especially Meade, the benefits far outweighed those costs.

One of the main benefits of General Grant's method of command occurred in Georgia when he ordered Sherman to join with the armies of Meade and Butler. This junction would have been wrong in three senses. First, it would have been inconsistent with the General's overall desire to "hammer continuously against the armed forces of the enemy and his resources." Second, it may have led to Johnston joining Lee--the very thing General Grant's original vision sought to preclude. Third, it probably was unsupportable in terms of logistics and space. However, this potentially significant error was avoided. Why? To a large degree because of the way in which General Grant commanded.

Another important element of General Grant's command style is that of giving maximum latitude to his subordinate commanders, constrained only by the campaign's end-state and the operational objectives of the original campaign plan. As one would expect, the more the General trusted a subordinate, the more latitude he gave them. To Sherman, for example, Grant came to feel that the decision--whether to march toward Savannah or pursue Hood--had best be left to the man on the spot. Thus General Grant wrote to Sherman, "If there is any way of getting at Hood's army I would prefer that, but I must trust to your own judgement."<sup>115</sup> To Sheridan, the General wrote, "If the Army at Richmond could be cut off from Southwest Va. it would be of great importance to us but I know the difficulty of supplying so far from your base."<sup>116</sup> However, even to less able subordinates--like Sigel, Banks, and Butler--the General's initial *modus operandi* was "careful not to chide...in public and in general...to command by encouragement

rather than reproof....he waited until the man inexcusably overstepped military proprieties before relieving him."<sup>117</sup> Even to Butler, General Grant wrote, "All the minor details of your advance are left entirely to your direction."<sup>118</sup> In short, a Grant-subordinate was given latitude until he proved he could not handle it. Then he got supervision, and plenty of it. With Hunter in the Valley, for example, General Grant provided detailed instructions. When these instructions, because of misinterpretation resulting from "retransmission" in Washington, seemed misunderstood, General Grant sent Sheridan with direct information and two divisions of cavalry to assist Hunter. Only when this failed, was Hunter relieved. General Grant seemed to know that it was impossible, even with the use of telegraph and railroad, for him to centralize all decisions. For his overall campaign plan to come to fruition, he would have to develop a sense of commitment to the plan among his subordinates, trust them to execute, or supervise them until they did. If all this failed, General Grant simply replaced the subordinate -- if he could -- and put into place someone in whom he had confidence.

Use of this system of command, in conjunction with the actions of subordinate theater armies and the strength of the General's overall campaign vision, contributed directly to success. These three elements were in harmony; each complemented the other. Together they contributed to success. General Grant devised a plan that his subordinate armies could execute, given the enemy they faced, the terrain on which they were to fight, and the infrastructure they had available. Then he organized his armies so as to conform to the plan and coordinated, in some ways "sold," his plan to the theater army commanders. Finally he used a system of command characterized by giving latitude to subordinates but remaining constantly in touch with the overall situation via letter, telegraph message, staff visit, or personal presence. One cannot point to a single item and claim with any plausibility, "this is the decisive factor, the main cause of General Grant's victory." Rather, synergism -- the integration of plan, army,

command system, and how these three complemented each other--was decisive.

Important as each part was, each gained decisive importance as part of the whole. Success lay in the whole, not the parts. In the fact that the sum is greater than the parts, one finds evidence that campaign design is as much art as science. In the case of General Grant's 1864-65 campaign, success seems to result from at least these four contributing components:

1. An intellectual component. This component has to do with how the General weaved the strategic aim given to him by President Lincoln into the campaign plan, how he devised a military end-state that would achieve the strategic aim, and how his operational objectives were, in turn, linked to the military end-state. Devising a plan to fit a specific situation is, in the end, a creative process of the intellect. A campaign plan that is to succeed must make use of proper principles in a correct way relative to the specific enemy situation and terrain. To paraphrase Mao, just as the cobbler should shape the shoe to fit the foot, so too must the campaign planner fit the plan to the situation--friendly and enemy--he faces and the strategic aims he must achieve.<sup>119</sup> On one hand, "proper principle" and "correct application" are objective in the sense that knowledge of both principles and application are available to all who care to study war. On the other hand, they are subjective in the sense that which principles are chosen and how they are applied are decisions that commanders make based upon their analysis of the situation, their experience, and the strategic direction they receive. This kind of decision is a creative, intellectual act of judgement, for no model or formula is available to give the commander mathematical certainty in his choice. Furthermore, unlike the nearly complete information available to students of military history, commanders having to devise a plan and make decisions in an actual situation have only incomplete and partially correct information. They must judge, decide, and act under the conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty--the fog of war.

2. A psychological-physical component. A good plan means nothing without the means to carry it out. The most important means are three: the armed force, to include leaders and staff; physical space and infrastructure; and political will.

First, the armed force must be of sufficient number of tactically proficient, cohesive, properly equipped units to execute what the plans call for. The leaders of this armed force must be knowledgeable of what the overall commander wants to do and competent enough to do it. The staff, in turn, must be proficient enough to plan, coordinate, and supervise the activities of the employed forces. Success does not require genius on everyone's part. However, there are minimal standards, and the commander must assess the force he plans to use to fight, its leaders, and its staff to ensure that each meets the minimum of competency and proficiency.

Second, the commander needs enough physical space and infrastructure to execute and support his plan. Numbers alone will not determine success. Rather, numbers that can be used are those that count. To use the armies of Meade, Butler, Banks, Sherman, and Sigel, as he intended, General Grant needed theaters of adequate size and infrastructure. Just as he would have had to devise a different plan if he had only three subordinate theater armies, he would have had to devise a different plan if the size of the Confederate States were one-third what they were. Similarly, to provide the logistical support necessary for all his armies and to command as he did, General Grant needed the Mississippi, the rail network, the telegraph, and the coastal waterway system of the east. Without these, he would have needed a much different plan. The point is simply this: there is a relationship among physical space, infrastructure, size of force, aim, and a successful campaign.

Third, a campaign has no chance of success if the political support of the government and society to see the campaign through to completion does not exist. Part of "cutting the shoes to fit the feet" in campaign design is to create a campaign that will maintain popular and governmental support. The relationship between political and military leaders is reciprocal. Neither is a

free agent with respect to the campaign plan.

On one hand, President Lincoln reminded General Grant that "there was a limit to the sinews of war, and a time might be reached when the spirits and resources of the people would become exhausted" and expected the General to take this into account in devising his military plans. On the other hand, the President was willing to accept what it took to accomplish the strategic aims he had set. In this regard, the President's support of General Grant is best expressed in a letter to the General just before the campaign began:

Not expecting to see you again before the Spring campaign opens, I wish to express...my entire satisfaction with what you have done up to this time.... Your are vigilant and self-reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints or restraints upon you. While I am very anxious that any great disaster, or the capture of our men in great numbers, shall be avoided, I know these points are less likely to escape your attention than they would mine. If these is anything wanting which is within my power to give, do not fail to let me know it.<sup>120</sup>

Societal and governmental support is required if a campaign such as General Grant's is to succeed. Securing and maintaining such support rests upon the shoulders of both military and political leaders.

3. A cybernetic component. Cybernetics, in this context, concerns all equipment, organizational, and human systems that ensure proper gathering, processing and dissemination of information necessary for command, control, and coordination of a campaign. The cybernetic component describes that equipment and those systems and processes that an organization uses to gather information, decide, and act when it is confronted with a task and has less information required to perform that task.

This component is necessary because of the nature of a campaign. A campaign consists of a series of battles distributed over time and space. Therefore, a commander will have to make decisions subsequent to the initial ones needed to formulate the campaign plan and start the campaign. Furthermore, opportunities that no one could have predicted will arise during a

campaign, and subordinate commanders must make decisions "on-the-spot" to take advantage of these opportunities. Making decisions as events unfold requires the senior commander to establish a system by which to gain information, process that information, and disseminate it so as to enhance his force's ability to act correctly and react more quickly than the enemy. Further, whatever system or processes the commander establishes must work under the normal conditions of war--incomplete and conflicting information, uncertainty, danger, emotion, ambiguity, fog, and friction.

General Grant's command system sought to meet these criteria. Initial consensus and commitment to the plan; keeping his subordinates informed via letter, telegraph message, or staff visit; use of staff as a "directed telescope" as well as a conduit of his intent; and his personal presence--all were the General's way of creating a reliable system with which to gain and pass information and control and coordinate his armies. Initially, General Grant did not have "many friends amongst the Army of the Potomac men. They were all McClellan men....They did not like him [Grant] and had no confidence in him."<sup>121</sup> But success breeds confidence. The General's subordinates came to understand and trust his system and his temperament, for it was through this system that General Grant came to imbue his subordinates with the unremitting energy he knew was needed to win.<sup>122</sup>

4. A harmonic component. This last component is nothing other than the state which results when the first three complement one another. That is, that the plan developed is good and can be executed by the forces and leaders and within the space and infrastructure available, using the command system the commander has developed. If these three components are not in harmony, then the commander has four choices: he can adjust his plan, adjust his means, adjust his command system, or ask that his aim be adjusted.

Harmony during General Grant's campaign was absent several times. One example of how

the General tried to get things back into harmony will suffice to make the point: Hunter, Sigel's replacement in the Shenandoah, had difficulty executing his portion of the plan. The General sent Sheridan with instruction to allay the difficulty in the command system and two cavalry brigades to allay the problems with means. When this proved not enough, Hunter was replaced with Sheridan who got the job done.

The factors contributing to the success of General Grant's 1864-65 campaign were many, too many to present in an monograph of this length. However, the analysis presented in this monograph does warrant at least two conclusions. First, the General's success lay in the whole, not the parts. His plan was good enough, his armies sufficiently capable, and his command system adequate--but "good enough," "sufficiently capable," and "adequate," when taken together were decisive. Therein lies the chief indication that designing a campaign is as much art as science. Of course, everything in war is relational and contextual. General Grant succeeded because Lee and the South were failing. True. But to think only in these terms is to miss a second, important conclusion that emerges from the study of General Grant's campaign. That is, that the General designed and fought a campaign of annihilation, not of exhaustion.

#### CONCLUSIONS.

One finds the classic definition of the strategies of annihilation and exhaustion in the fourth volume of Hans Delbruck's history of war, *The Dawn of Modern Warfare*. According to Delbruck, a commander who chooses a strategy of exhaustion places "his hopes...on wearing [the enemy] out and exhausting him by blows and destruction of all kinds to the extent that in the end he prefers to accept the conditions of the victor, which in this case must always show a certain moderation."<sup>123</sup> A strategy of annihilation, on the other hand, seeks to "completely defeat the enemy....by [seeking out] the main force of the enemy, defeat[ing] it, and follow[ing] up the

victory until the defeated side subjects itself to the will of the victor."<sup>124</sup> Delbruck cites

Professor Otto Hintze as capturing the essence of the strategy of annihilation:

The objective that the strategy of annihilation envisages is always the enemy army; it must be sought out and defeated....[to continue] the war in a single campaign as long as it took for the enemy to accept...[the victor's] conditions for peace. That is what the strategy of annihilation looks like.<sup>125</sup>

Finally, Delbruck echoes by speaking of the strategy of exhaustion as a,

"bipolar strategy," that is, the strategy in which the general decides from moment to moment whether he is to achieve his goal by battle or by maneuver, so that his decisions vary constantly...between the two poles of maneuver and battle....This strategy stands in opposition to [that] which sets out directly to attack the enemy armed forces and destroy them and to impose the will of the conqueror on the conquered--the strategy of annihilation.<sup>126</sup>

To be sure, both a strategy of exhaustion and of annihilation require attrition. Attrition of an enemy's armed forces and resources occurs regardless of the strategy one adopts. The difference lies in the use of attrition. If one uses attrition to wear out an enemy in the attempt to "convince" the enemy to accept the conditions one offers, one adopts a strategy of exhaustion. If one uses attrition to directly attack the enemy army in the attempt to completely defeat then impose one's will upon the enemy, one adopts a strategy of annihilation.

General Grant did not seek to wear out or to exhaust the South. He had no intention to attrit the South until her government preferred "to accept the conditions of the victor," which would "show a certain moderation." Quite the contrary. The General designed and executed a campaign to defeat the South completely. His campaign sought out the two main armies of the South with the intent of defeating them. Every action the General took and every decision he made aimed at this end--destruction of the enemy's armed forces and resources. Further, in response to Lee's request "to meet you [Grant]...for the purpose of arranging definitely the terms upon which the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia will be received,"<sup>127</sup> General Grant stated flatly that "the terms upon which peace can be had are well



understood....the South laying down their arms."<sup>128</sup> Neither Lee nor any other representative of the Confederate States were given the opportunity "to accept the conditions of the victor, which...show a certain moderation." Rather, General Grant was imposing "the will of the conqueror on the conquered." He demanded "unconditional surrender," consistent with the goal of a campaign of annihilation.

One might object by pointing out that General Grant did not focus solely on the enemy's main armed forces, as Delbruck says is essential to a strategy of annihilation. In fact, as Delbruck's strategy of exhaustion requires, the General delivered a "variety of blows and destruction" throughout the campaign. This objection raises an important point, for it identifies a shift in the definition of "annihilation." During the time Delbruck wrote, as was the case with both Clausewitz and Jomini before him, a commander could annihilate his enemy and impose his will simply by defeating his army, often in one decisive battle. These writers had before their minds' eye the classic "Napoleonic decisive battle." However by 1864-65, the situations in which such a decisive battle of annihilation was possible were becoming rare. A commander could not attain annihilation and be in a position to impose one's will simply by defeating the enemy main armed forces, nor could he attain annihilation in one decisive battle. Somewhere after the industrial revolution and by the time General Grant's campaign occurred, the definition of "annihilation" expanded and the decisive effect of a single battle dissipated. To annihilate one's enemy, to be in a position to impose one's will as a "conqueror on the conquered," a commander now had to destroy his enemy's war making capability which included both armed forces and resources. General Grant's campaign not only incorporated this change, but also a second, related change.

That is, the armed forces of opposing nations could not concentrate at one point to conduct a decisive battle. Rather, the concentration of effects of a campaign became decisive. Conditions now required defeat of an enemy armed force and destruction of resources--over time and space

via simultaneous and sequential battles--to attain a decisive victory of annihilation.

Acknowledging this shift, Russel Weigley wrote in *The American Way of War*,

Grant proposed a strategy of annihilation based upon the principles of concentration and mass, hitting the main Confederate armies with the concentrated thrust of massive Federal forces until the Confederate armies were smashed into impotence....Unlike Lee, Grant entertained no illusions about being able to destroy enemy armies in a single battle....His method of achieving the destruction of the enemy was not to seek the Austerlitz battle....Grant became the prophet of a strategy of annihilation in a new dimension, seeking the literal destruction of the enemy's armies as the means to victory....[including strikes] against war resources...[as] an indirect means of accomplishing the destruction of the enemy armies.<sup>129</sup>

Herein lies Fuller's error. Fuller understood that the conventional view that General Grant's strategy was one of exhaustion was incorrect. What Fuller failed to see was that the General did not intend his armies to concentrate at one point for the conduct of a decisive battle. Fuller overlooked the effects of the industrial revolution on warfare. Whereas prior to the industrial revolution a commander-in-chief could annihilate his enemy through one, decisive battle, such was no longer the case. Afterward, annihilation required defeat of an enemy army and his resources; annihilation acquired an economic dimension, it entailed destruction of the enemy's capacity to wage war. General Grant recognized this change; thus, he never intended to concentrate as Fuller suggests.

General Grant's intention not to concentrate is clearly expressed on a map he sent to Sherman on the 26th of March 1864. On this map, the General sketched out the outline of the plan. In Sherman's words, the "map...contains more information and ideas than a volume of printed matter....I know the results aimed at. I know by base, and have a pretty good idea of my Lines of operations."<sup>130</sup> This map shows no "gigantic concentration" at a single point. Quite the contrary. Rather than concentrate armies at a single point, General Grant sought to keep his main armies separate while concentrating pressure on two main objective points--the armies of Lee and Johnston. Secondly, General Grant's 2nd of April, 1865, letter to Butler says, "It will

not be possible to unite our Armies into two or three large ones...But, generally speaking, concentration can be practically effected by the Armies moving to the interior of the enemy's country. [emphasis added]"<sup>131</sup> Further evidence that Fuller's interpretation of General Grant's campaign plan is incorrect comes from a third source: the conduct of the campaign.

The General conducted operations to create then increase pressure on the armies of Lee and Johnston by "hammering continuously against the armed force of the enemy ...and his resources."<sup>132</sup> Pressure built on these two enemy armies as they lost their ability to resupply and shift forces via railroads; their domestic and international sources of supply, industrial and agricultural; and the support and confidence of their soldiers and civilian population. What created this pressure? The combined effects of General Grant's campaign. Who felt this pressure? Lee and Johnston. Thus one seems warranted in concluding that the General's campaign sought to "impose the will of the conqueror on the conquered" by destroying the enemy armed forces and resources. However, the campaign did not seek to concentrate its armies at one decisive point. Rather, it sought to concentrate effects, create pressure, upon two main objective points. At one point--when Sherman was outside Savannah--the General directed a concentration of his main armies at one point. However, for the reasons stated above, such a movement did not occur. This one exception aside, General Grant's campaign of 1864-65 exemplified a campaign (vice battle) of annihilation, thus corroborating the expanded concept of "annihilation" which Fuller did not recognize.

Of course, one cannot know whether or not General Grant explicitly held and acted upon these ideas. In fact, he probably did not. One must also be careful not to imply that General Grant was a visionary; he was not. His "genius" lie with solving problems and doggedly seeing the solution carried out. In developing his campaign, he probably was merely adapting to the situation in which he found himself, doing what worked given the enemy and terrain he faced.

However, whether General Grant realized it or not, and again he probably did not, he stood at an important threshold in the history of operational art. To think of his success merely as a result the exhaustion of the Confederacy and of Lee's diminished strength is to misunderstand the campaign and underestimate General Grant's vision. When J.F.C. Fuller began researching his book, *Grant and Lee*, he had

accepted the conventional point of view that Grant was a butcher and Lee one of the greatest generals this world has ever seen....Then I turned to Grant, and found him to be nothing like the Grant I had been led to picture; lastly to Lee, to discover that in several respects he was one of the most incapable Generals-in-Chief in history--so much for school education.<sup>133</sup>

General Grant's campaign of 1864-65 marks two important points of departure from classic military theory. First, from the understanding of "annihilation" solely as destruction of the enemy armed forces to a conjunction of armed forces and resources--i.e. destruction of the enemy's war making capability. Second, from concentration at a single point for a decisive battle of annihilation to a concentration of effects for a campaign of annihilation distributed over time and space.

When, on March 11th, 1864, General Grant assumed duties as commander of all the Northern Armies "the opposing forces stood in substantially the same relations toward each other as three years before."<sup>134</sup> For three years, each army sought a decisive battle. For three years, each army focussed on the other. The result? Three years of death, worry, and stalemate. Less than thirteen months later, on April 4th, 1865, President Lincoln walked the streets of Richmond. April 9th saw the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia. On April 12th, Mobile surrendered; April 26th, Johnston. On May 10th Jefferson Davis was captured. With General Grant came victory. Victory for many reasons to be sure. However, two of the more important military reasons must be: the General's his focus on hammering continuously against both the enemy armed force and his resources and his prescient shift from searching for a decisive battle to conducting a decisive campaign.

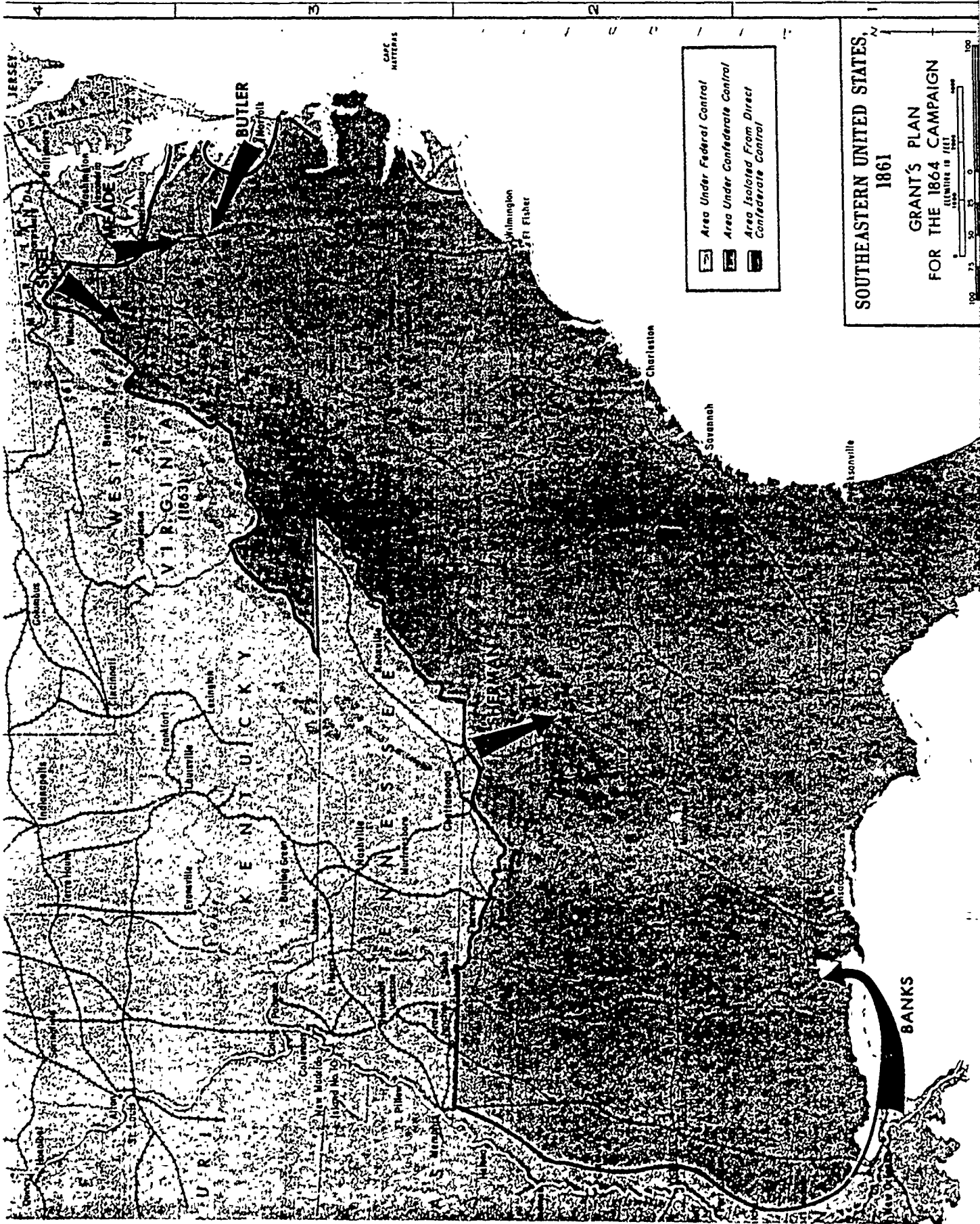
With the passing in review of the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the West came the arrival of a new form of warfare. Perhaps no one recognized it then; unfortunately, few recognize it even now.

Appendix 1.

A. Union National Military Strategy, April 1864 135

B. Major Campaigns in the Theater of War 136

C. The Theater of War 137



SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES,  
1861

GRANT'S PLAN  
FOR THE 1864 CAMPAIGN

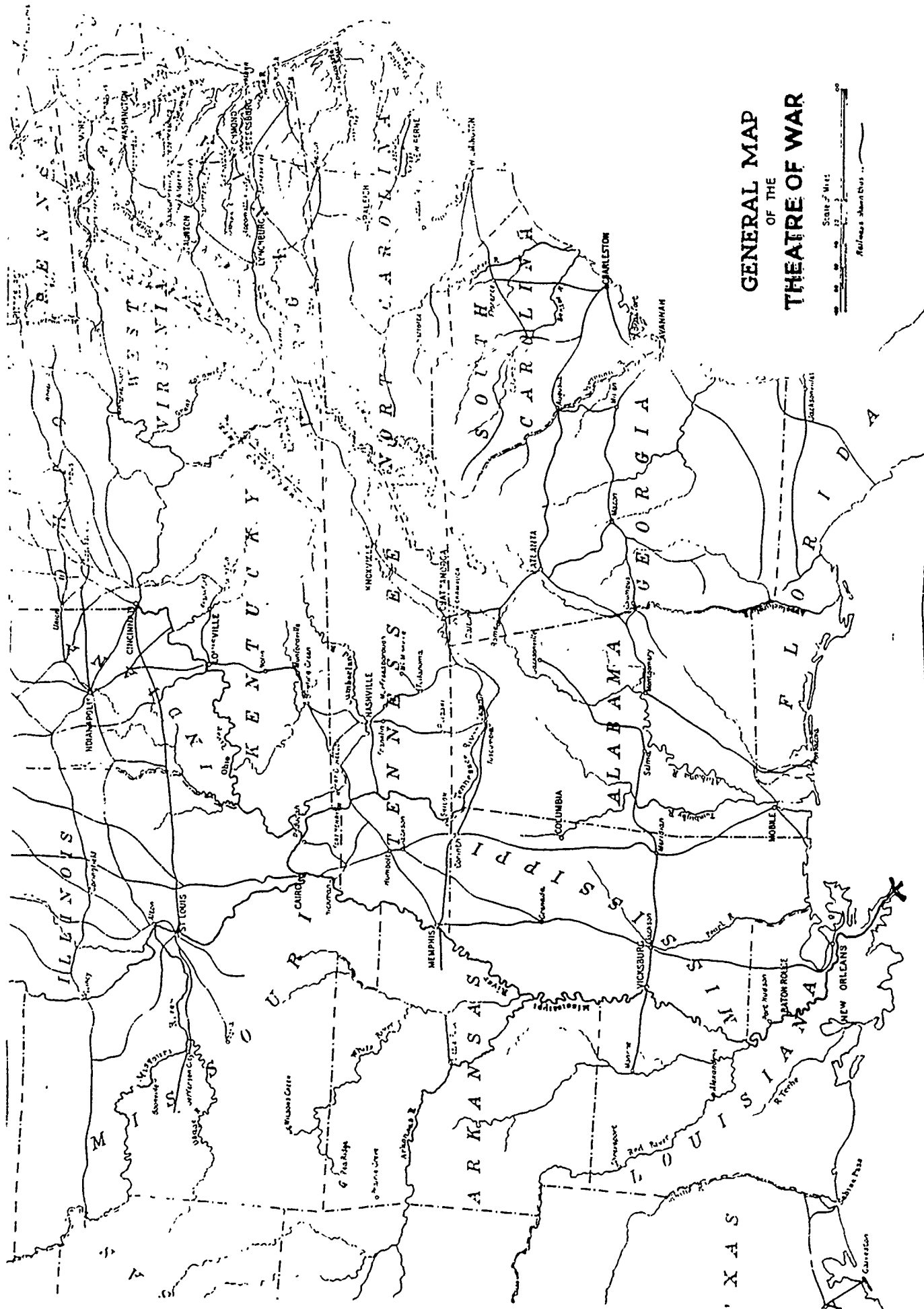
- Area Under Federal Control
- Area Under Confederate Control
- Area Isolated From Direct Confederate Control



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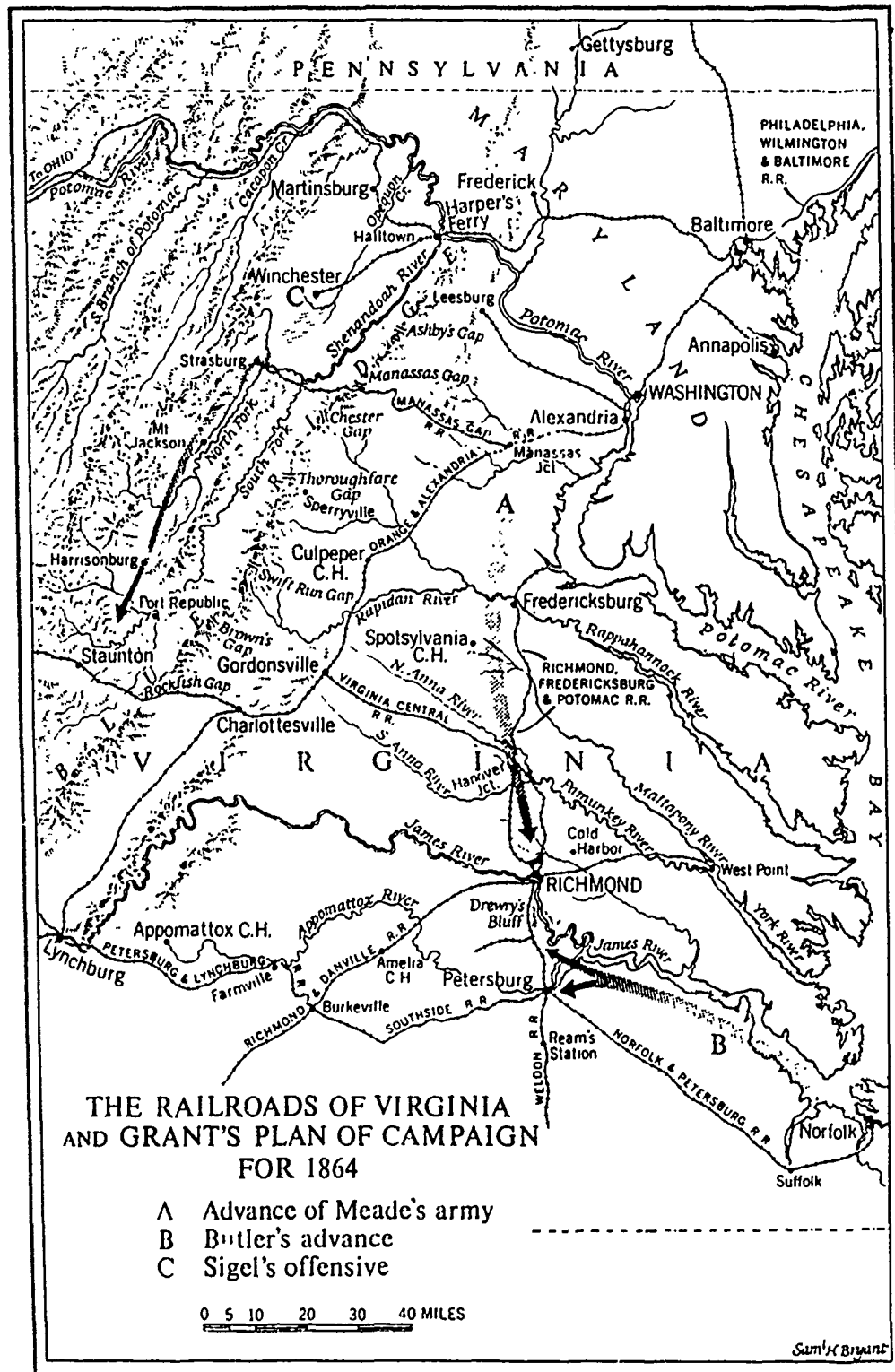


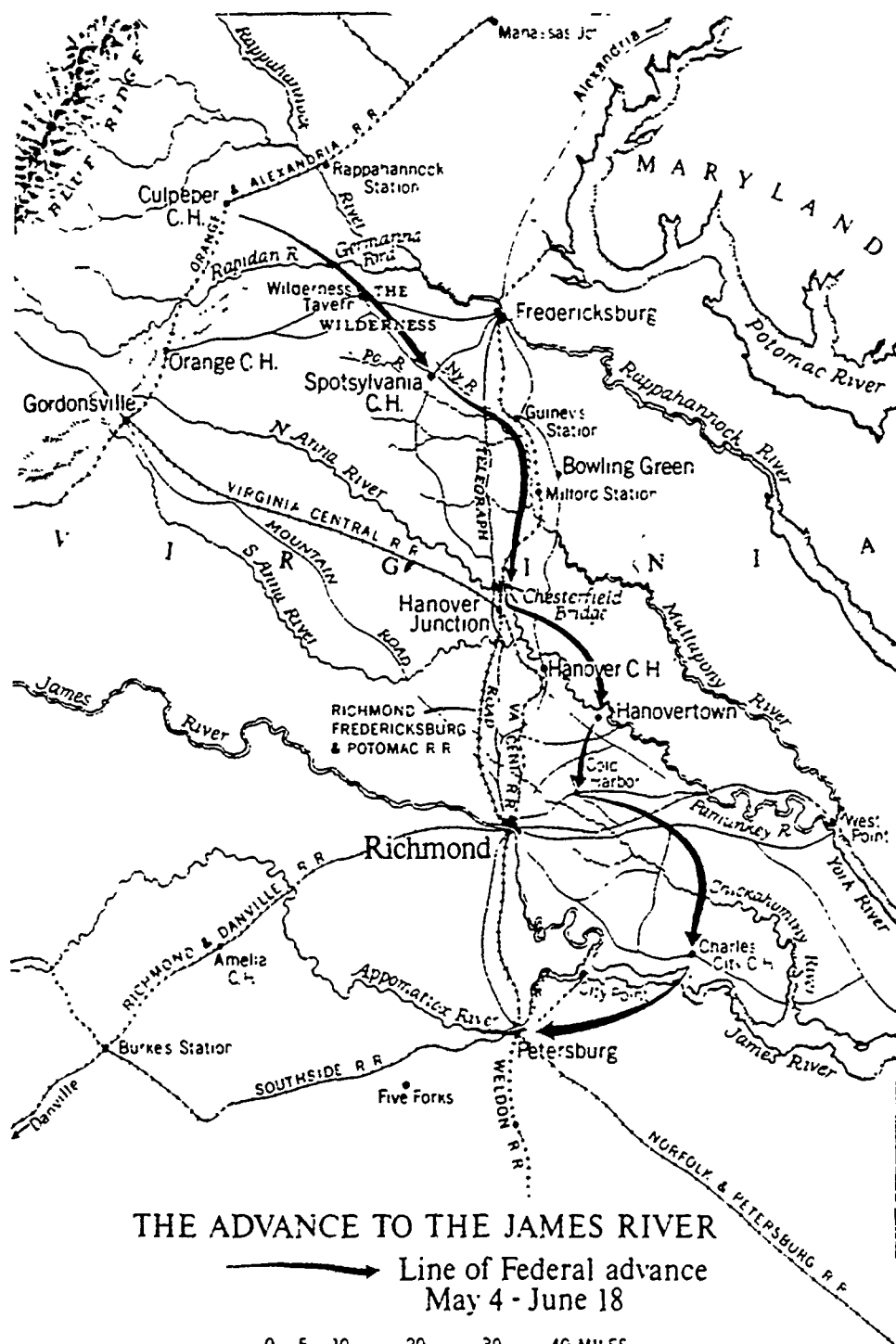


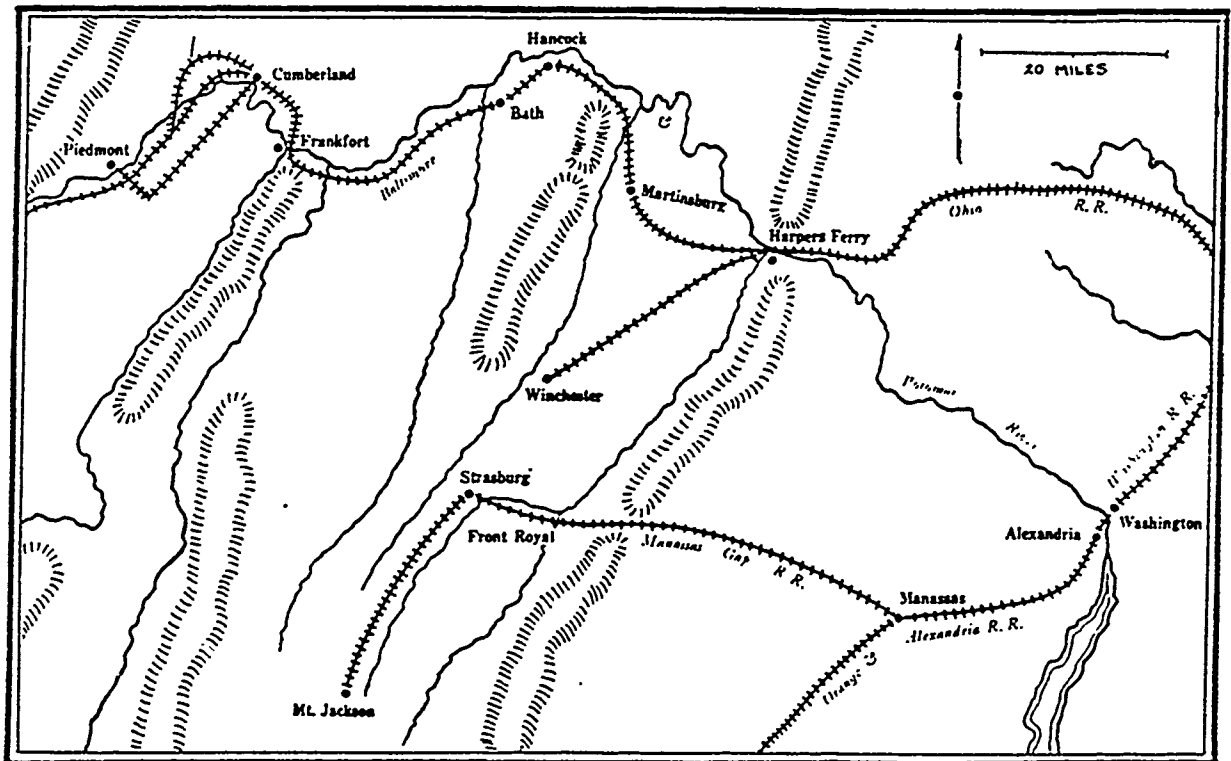


Appendix 2.

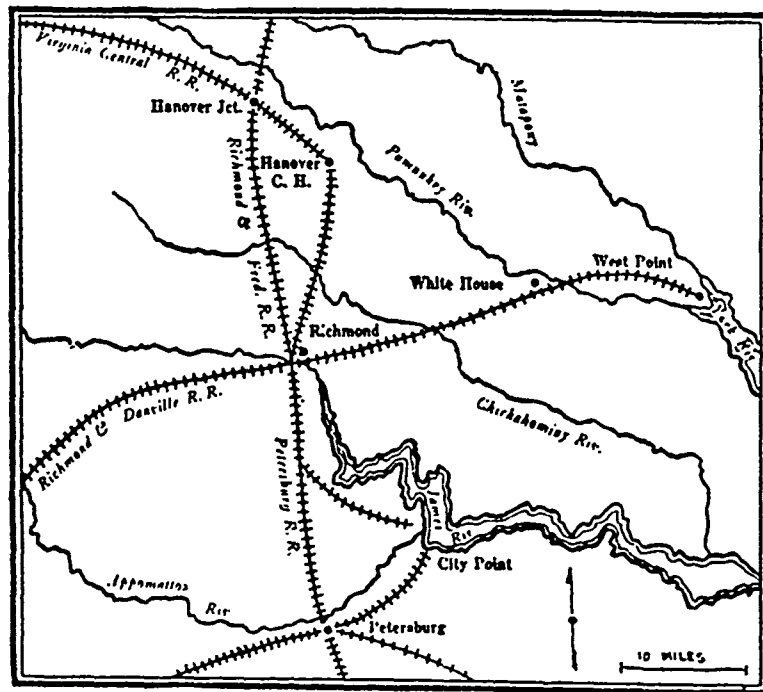
- A. The Railroads of Virginia and Grant's Plan of Campaign for 1864<sup>138</sup>
- B. The Advance to the James River<sup>139</sup>
- C. The Shenandoah and Northern Virginia<sup>140</sup>
- D. Lines in the Richmond Area<sup>141</sup>
- E. The Network of Railroads Around Petersburg<sup>142</sup>



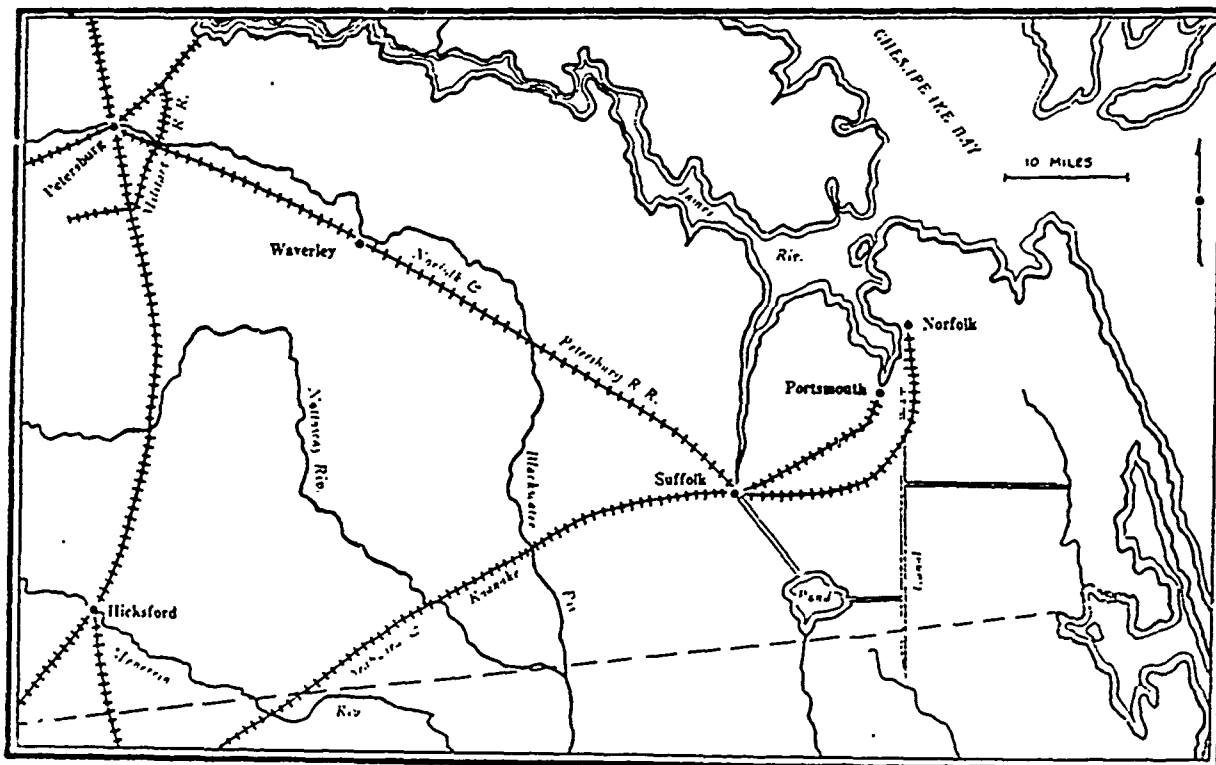




THE SHENANDOAH AND NORTHERN VIRGINIA



LINES IN THE RICHMOND AREA



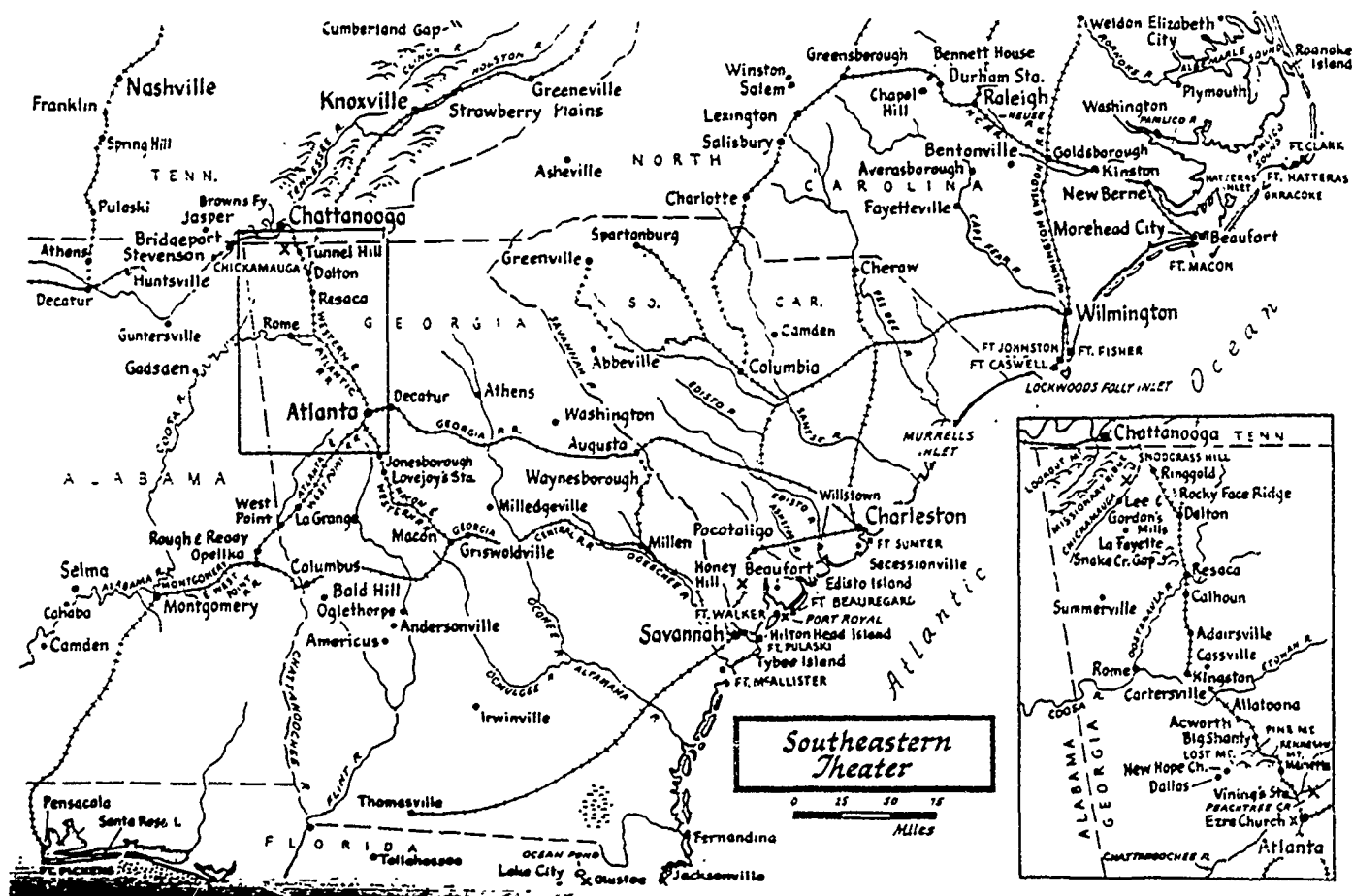
THE NETWORK OF RAILROADS AROUND PETERSBURG

Appendix 3.

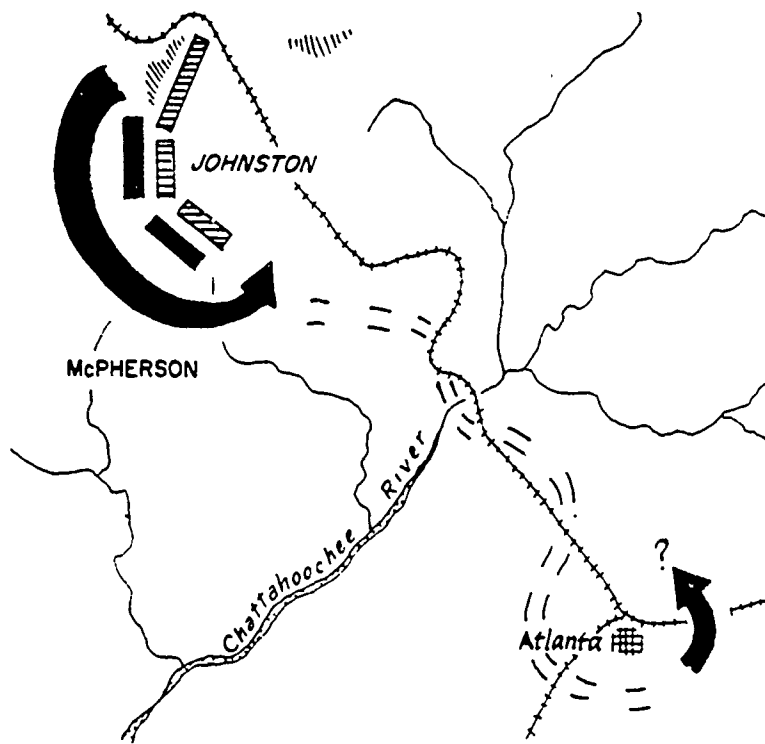
A. The Southeastern Theater<sup>143</sup>

B. Sherman's Plan (from Chattanooga to Atlanta), March and Railroad Destruction (from Atlanta to Savannah), Advance (from Savannah to Fayetteville)<sup>144</sup>

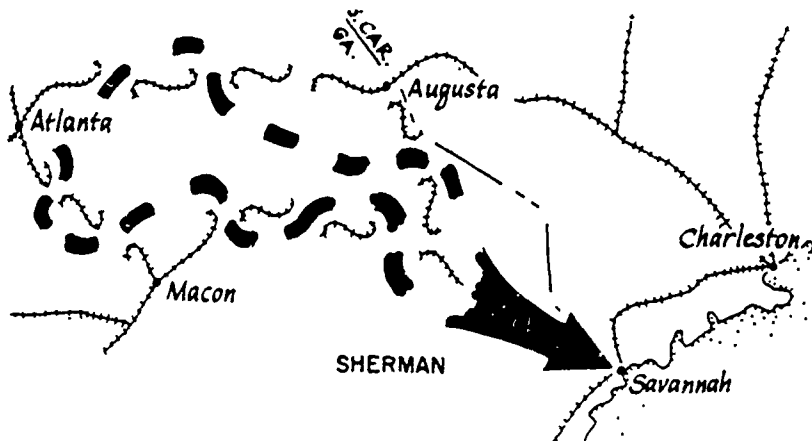
C. Lines from Chattanooga to Atlanta<sup>145</sup> and Atlanta to the Sea<sup>146</sup>



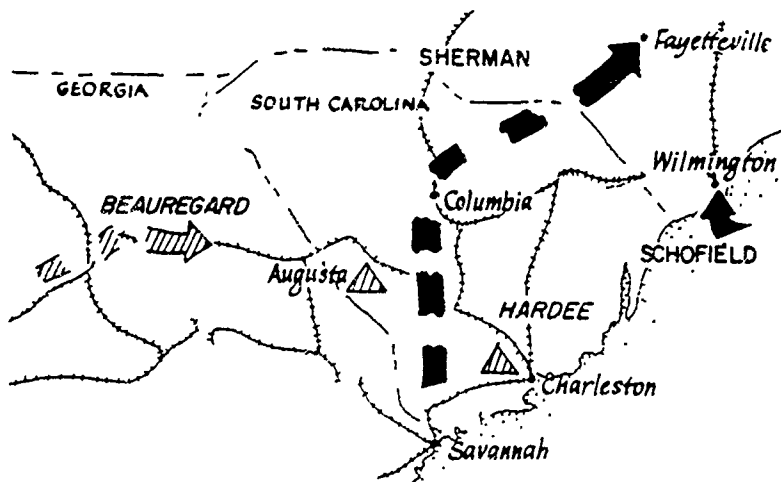




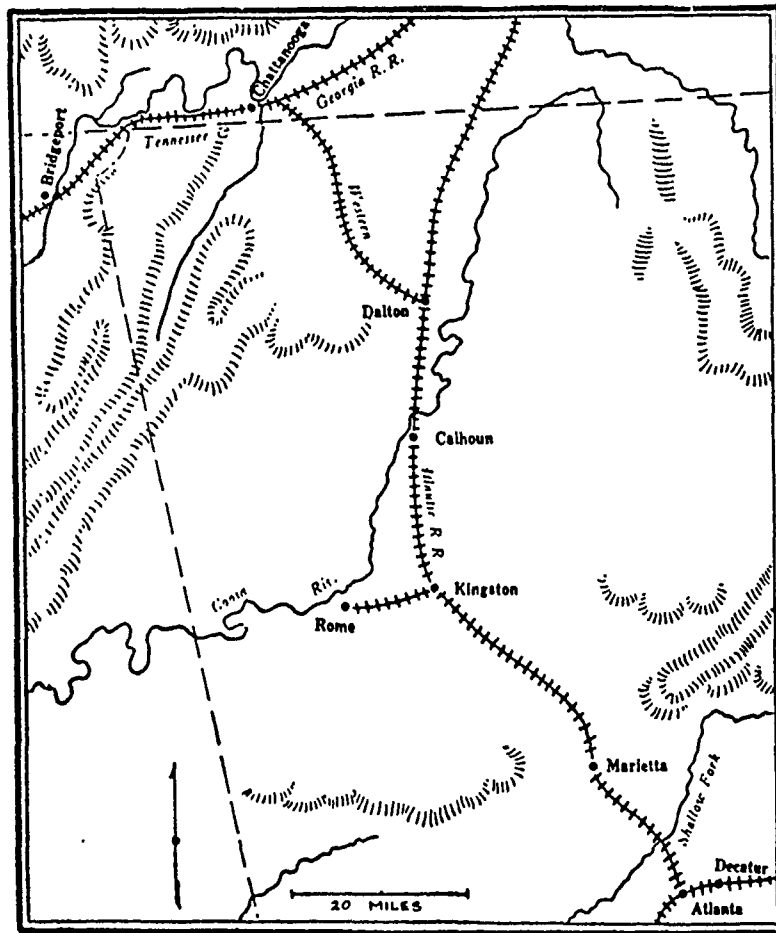
*Sherman's Plan*



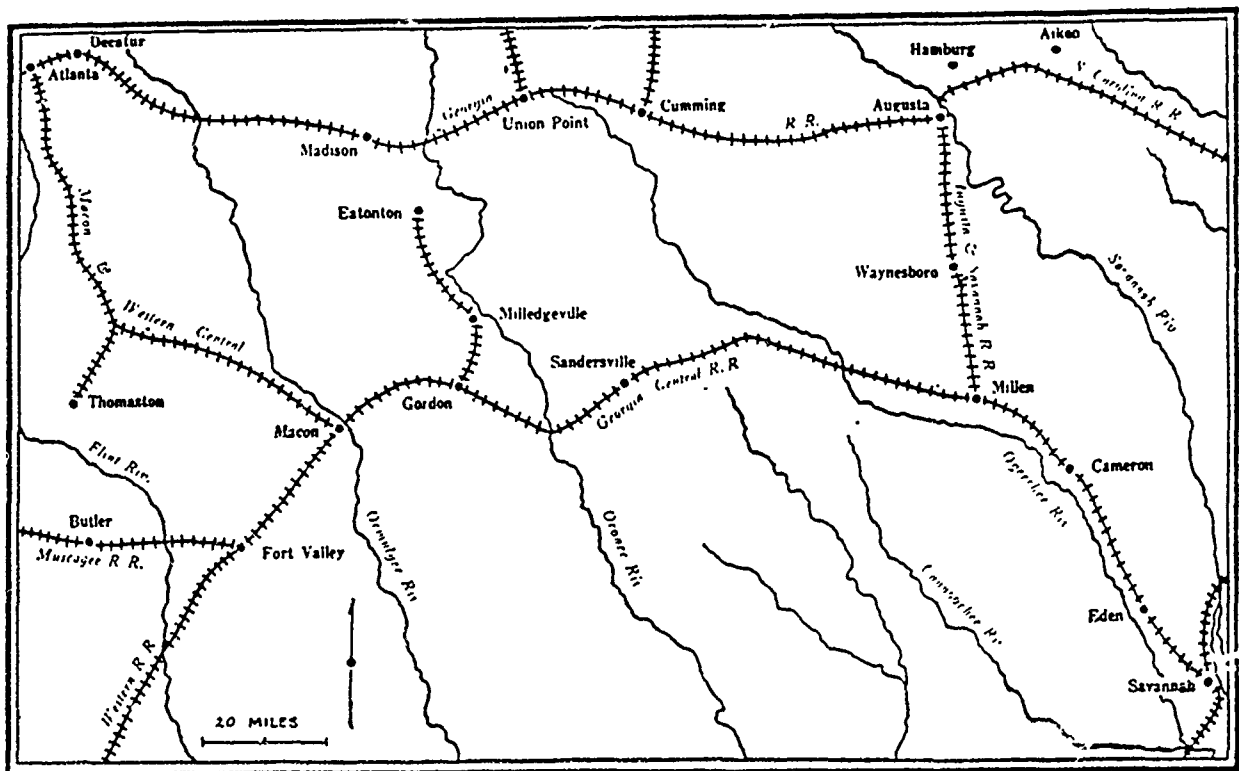
*Sherman's March and Railroad Destruction*



*Sherman's Advance*



LINES FROM CHATTANOOGA TO ATLANTA



ATLANTA TO THE SEA

## ENDNOTES

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11. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, p. 592.
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52. Sherman, "The Grand Strategy of the Last Year of the War," p. 248.
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64. During the campaign in the east, only three notable re-inforcements did occur: Early to the Shenandoah Valley, subordinates of Breckenridge from the Valley to Lee, and to Beauregard at Petersburg. In each of these cases, the re-inforcements were permitted because of error or lack of aggressiveness on the part of one or more Union commanders.

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NOTE: reference to this letter does not appear in Grant's Memoirs.

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93. Wilson, *Grant's Papers*, v.12, pp. 334; v.13, p. 458.
94. Wilson, *Grant's Papers*, v.13, p. 458.
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98. Wilson, *Grant's Papers*, v.14, p. 164.
99. Wilson, *Grant's Papers*, v.14, p. 164.
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108. Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, p. 449.
109. Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, p. 449.

110. Catton, *Grant Takes Command*, p. 141
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